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Coda

Overexpression and Its Legacy

Once upon a time, the celebrity was a freak. Whether she was born "abnormally interesting" or had abnormal interest thrust upon her, she tended to stand out in a crowd—and thus to suffer the whispered rumors, the printed gossip, the pokings and proddings and losses of privacy that society reserves for its most visible scapegoats.[1]

Once upon a time the celebrity was a freak but then, instead of shrinking from his freakishness, he learned to embrace and even to exaggerate it until it became the key to his liberation. He wore it in the curls of his wig and in the hump on his back, wrote it into the spellings of his words and the pages of his book; he used it to tell the story of his life. And then, two hundred years later, in one of the most widely viewed artifacts of Western celebrity culture, he brought it back from the dead.

Michael Jackson's *Thriller* became the best-selling album of all time following its release in 1982, and the long-form music video (directed by John Landis) that accompanied the title track transformed the music industry.[2] With its high production values, its technological innovations, and its unmistakable style, the *Thriller* video exemplifies the decadent, late twentieth-century American celebrity culture of which it was a part. In introducing it in the coda to a book about eighteenth-century British celebrity culture, I do not mean to elide the significant differences between those eras. Jackson's early success as a childhood star and his later career as an international idol highlight the twentieth-century celebrity's dependence on an army of publicists, stylists, choreographers, managers, and makeup artists who were largely absence from the eighteenth-century performer's entourage and whose presence complicates the ways in which the celebrity can be said to control his or her own self-presentation. The media technology driving celebrity cul-

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ture had evolved as well in the two hundred years between Mary Robinson's miniature picture and Jackson's full-color video, broadcast into fans' living rooms immediately and repeatedly at the mere flip of a switch.

Before I address these differences, however, I want to linger momentarily on the similarities between Jackson's performances—most notably those on display in the *Thriller* video—and the autobiographical performances of the eighteenth-century celebrities who came before him. These similarities do not demonstrate (and I do not wish to imply) a direct line of descent from Cibber's *Apology* to Jackson's *Thriller*. Nor do I mean to attribute some universality or timelessness to artifacts that, as the rest of this book has insisted, emerge from a particular historical moment, a particular and culturally conditioned definition of privacy and publicity, and particular (post-Enlightenment and unmistakably Western) assumptions about identity. Instead, I introduce these similarities in order to emphasize the debt that today's (post-Enlightenment, Western) assumptions about privacy, publicity and identity owe to those that emerged in eighteenth-century London. The traces of overexpression that still linger in the artifacts of twentieth- and twenty-first-century celebrity culture teach us the importance of long-past performances—even performances as seemingly flighty and ephemeral as the autobiographical performances of eighteenth-century celebrities—in shaping the culture we inhabit today.

For if we look closely, even the artifacts of eighteenth-century celebrity culture that seem most foreign appear strangely and surprisingly familiar. The practice of including autopsy reports in eighteenth-century biographies like Benjamin Victor's 1733 *Memoirs of Barton Booth*, for instance, seems barbaric until we recall the urgency with which twenty-first-century audiences clamored for the release of Michael Jackson's autopsy report after he died of a drug overdose in 2009.[3] The celebrity status of the eighteenth-century castrati seems similarly unbelievable given twenty-first-century gender norms—and yet Jackson's famously falsetto voice invited comparisons to the castrato not only by Internet conspiracy theorists but also by Dr. Alain Branchereau, a professor at Timone University Hospital in Marseilles, France, who speculated in a 2009 interview that Jackson had been "chemically castrat[ed]" by his use of crypterone, a drug he took for severe acne.[4]

Less surprising but no less revealing is Jackson's interest in the genre of celebrity autobiography that Cibber introduced. In her collection of essays about the pop icon, Margo Jefferson notes that "Michael Jackson read [P. T.] Barnum's autobiography fervently (at least one of the eight versions) and gave copies to all of his staff, telling them, 'I want my career to be the greatest

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show on earth.'"[5] When he composed his own autobiography, *Moonwalk*, in 1988, Jackson adhered to the conventions of the genre in including a paradoxical plea for privacy within the published story of his life. "The price of fame can be a heavy one," he admits:

> I've been accused of being obsessed with my privacy and it's true that I am. People stare at you when you're famous. They're observing you and that's understandable, but it's not always easy. If you were to ask me why I wear sunglasses in public as often as I do, I'd tell you it's because I simply don't like to have to constantly look everyone in the eye. It's a way of concealing just a bit of myself. After I had my wisdom teeth pulled, the dentist gave me a surgical mask to wear home to keep out germs. I loved that mask. It was great—much better than sunglasses—and I had fun wearing it around for a while. There's so little privacy in my life that concealing a little bit of me is a way to give myself a break from all that. It may be considered strange, I know, but I like my privacy.[6]

Like Cibber and the generations of celebrities that followed him, Jackson clings to the publicity that elevated him from an unhappy childhood and from the poverty that otherwise seemed his fate. Just as steadfastly, however, he clings to the privacy that guaranteed his personhood but that seemed always out of reach in a career in which "people stare at you" and you "have to constantly look everyone in the eye."

Given the resemblance between Jackson's and Cibber's struggles with privacy and publicity, it makes sense that their solutions to these struggles bear some resemblance as well. Jackson describes his sunglasses and surgical mask as costume pieces meant to "conceal" his face, but his awareness of the "strange[ness]"—the freakishness—of his costumes suggests that at the same time that they conceal him they also make him more visible. Over the course of his career this strangeness became in itself a strategy for concealment, a way of removing himself from the categories through which other people—famous or not—were read, labeled, and dissected in the last two decades of the second millennium. Though these categories themselves are arguably unique to Jackson's particular culture, the strategy of concealment-through-revelation that he uses to deploy them—casting himself as a freak in his *Thriller* video as in so many of his autobiographical performances—contains traces of the overexpressions that Cibber and his eighteenth-century successors developed so long ago.

Indeed, far from using the elaborate costumes and heavy makeup of his

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Thriller character to conceal his "private self" from the viewing public, Jackson encourages his spectators to interpret the freakishness that defines his onscreen persona as an extension of the freakishness of the actor portraying him. Character and actor first meld into one early in the video, which opens on a private moment between a teenager (Jackson) and his date (Ola Ray), stranded when their car runs out of gas on a dark, deserted lane. When Ray refers to Jackson's character as "Michael," she invites us to read him as a version of the performer whose first name he shares and to read his bashful request that she "be my girl" as a glimpse into—or at least a metaphor for—the private life of our public star.[7] "Michael's" subsequent confession, "I'm not like other guys," seems, then, an admission of the plight of a celebrity, "helpless, and expos'd" (as Cibber termed it) to the burdens of public life.[8] But when the clouds part around a full moon and Michael suddenly morphs into a werewolf, we recognize this fame as inseparable from the monstrous freakishness that makes him "not like other guys." In other words, Jackson deploys the fantastical elements of the video not to distance his private self from his onstage persona. Instead, the video encourages us to interpret its star's freakishness as an indispensable part of his autobiographical performance—a performance as impossible to categorize as it is to ignore.

This oscillation between Jackson's freakish persona and his private self intensifies as the darkened lane gives way to a darkened theater, and we realize that the video we've been watching is a video within a video, viewed with us by a more realistic "Michael" and Ray in contemporary dress. Our relief lasts only briefly, as the two exit the theater to find themselves surrounded by zombies, whom Jackson soon joins in a ghoulish dance of the dead. This mise en abime that structures *Thriller*—a werewolf tale that turns out to be a video within a zombie tale that turns out, by its conclusion, to have been nothing but a dream—becomes less revelatory as it reveals more and more: each installment encourages us to read it as an insight into or a metaphor for Jackson's private life, only to be exposed, moments later, as part of an increasingly elaborate fiction that makes us question whether that private life ever existed at all. "The video plays on the idea: who is the real Michael Jackson?" writes cultural critic Jason King in a recent book about the star.[9] The question haunts the dance that Jackson performs at the video's climax, which emphasizes the uncategorizability of Jackson's autobiographical performances specifically by exaggerating his freakishness.

The dance begins with the zombies, who jerk, shrug, and twitch their way into a circle around Jackson and his companion. After zooming in on Ray's face, the camera follows her gaze to Jackson's face, its features now exag-

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gerated into the bugged eyes, sunken cheeks, and greenish skin of a ghoul. With the start of the beat Jackson joins the other zombies in their dance, and we suddenly recognize the jerks, shrugs, and twitches that once made the zombies particularly freakish as some of Jackson's signature moves. The effect is the opposite to that of, say, the ballerina who makes her long leaps and athletic arabesques appear natural and effortless: here, the zombified makeup and Gothic setting exaggerate the seeming impossibility of Jackson's signature contortions and defamiliarize his familiar body as undeniably monstrous. Highlighting rather than hiding his freakishness, Jackson begins to seem something other than human. And if he is something other than human, we can no more assign a precise gender, age, or race to his famous body than we can to the unreadable bodies of the zombies dancing in his wake.

One signature move in particular captures the pointed illegibility of Jackson's autobiographical performance—as well as the continued relevance of overexpression in the celebrity culture that millennial Anglo-America has inherited, through many a twist and turn, from eighteenth-century England. Approximately twenty seconds into his dance with the zombies, Jackson thrusts his pelvis to the left while cupping his groin with his left hand, biting his lip in an expression of concentration (or titillation?). Variations on this "crotch grab," as it came to be known, are some of Jackson's most recognizable—and most controversial—moves. The crotch grab appeared in videos from *Thriller* and *Billie Jean* (1982) to *Bad* (1987) and *The Way You Make Me Feel* (1987), often accompanied by a high-pitched "Ow!" that animated a gesture of unbridled machismo with the incongruous scream of a girl. By 1993, the crotch grab had become such a trademark part of Jackson's performances that Oprah Winfrey asked him, in an exclusive interview, "Why do you always grab your crotch?"[10] And a 2008 episode of *The Family Guy* featured a Jackson-like performer who takes the move to new heights by shooting his groin with a machine gun, all the time coupling his shots with the recognizable "Ow!"[11]

Behind the tongue-in-cheek tone of Winfrey's question and *The Family Guy*'s parody lurks a genuine bafflement that, I think, marks the endgame of so many of Jackson's performances. Jackson's crotch grab is a marker of identity so obvious as to become unreadable. The gesture itself seems a deixis of Jackson's masculinity: by grabbing the parts of his anatomy that mark him as a man, Jackson makes his manhood obvious to the point of vulgarity. The high-pitched "Ow!" confirms his masculinity by pointing out that Jackson has the parts—and feels the pain—of most men with similar anatomies. At the same time, the "Ow!" suggests damage to or destruction of those parts and

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of the masculinity that they guarantee. Pairing a gesture that indicates his manhood with the squeal of a girl (or of a castrato), Jackson dons a masculinity so overt that it has come to resemble femininity, an identity so obviously freakish and so freakishly obvious that it has become impossible to read.

Winfrey and the writers of *The Family Guy* aren't the only spectators to have greeted Jackson's autobiographical performances with confusion, and Jackson's gender and sexuality aren't the only aspects of his persona to have sparked such questions. "Was he man, boy, man-boy, or boy-woman?" Jefferson asks, repeating questions that had puzzled fans throughout Jackson's life (and hardly ceased after his death). Was he "mannequin or postmodern zombie? Here was a black person who had once looked unmistakably black, and now looked white or at least un-black. He was, at the very least, a new kind of mulatto, one created by science and medicine and cosmetology."[12] Jackson's twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics struggle and fail to fit their celebrity into the identifying taxonomies of age, gender, race, and sexuality that might make sense of him.[13]

Once upon a time the celebrity was a freak, but *Thriller* suggests some uses for this freakishness as part of an overexpressive strategy that allows the millennial celebrity to sell his story without giving himself away. It also suggests the anxieties of spectators worried that the celebrity's undeniable influence over his fans might transform his freakishness into the fashion. Such anxieties are nothing new: recall, for instance, the critic who speculated that Cibber's drawled "Harse" would spread into a universal "*Lingua Cibberiana*"; or the "clockmaker" who worried that Sterne's bawdy book had forever changed how people would interpret the name of his product.[14] In *Thriller*, these anxieties emerge in the choice of zombies as the monsters who would accompany Jackson in his dance. Unlike mummies, werewolves, or other creatures from the B-horror milieu that *Thriller* evokes, zombies—according to their mythology—aim not only to kill but to convert their victims into monsters like themselves. The final moments of the video, as Jackson reassures Ray that she has dreamed the zombies—only to flash a ghoulish grin at the camera before leading her out of the room—play upon precisely this anxiety. The contagious freakishness that once made Jackson "not like other guys" will spread, the final shot promises, until Ray, until the spectators encouraged to identify with her throughout the video, until all "other guys" become freaks just like him.

The difference between Jackson's zombies and Sterne's Shandyism is that in Jackson's case, the contagion of freakishness seems to have caught on. In October 2006, a group of sixty-two "zombies" met in a community hall in To-

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ronto, hoping to set the Guinness World Record for the largest *Thriller* dance performed simultaneously in one location. They succeeded so well that by the next year "Thrill the World" had spread to eighty cities in seventeen countries, where 1,722 people in zombie costumes danced in unison, brought together by and broadcast to the larger public through social media.[15] The movement's leader, dance instructor Ines Markeljevic, has used websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to publicize the event, which gains new followers each year. The success of Markeljevic's grassroots organization highlights one of the most important developments that celebrity culture has undergone since the eighteenth century, and that is the ease with which not only anyone but indeed everyone might attain celebrity status simply by manipulating the multiple publics that the Internet and social media have made widely available. In noting this development I am not revealing anything new, and today's pop culture pundits have been quick to point out the myriad ways that social media invites even the most private citizens to record and publicize the most intimate—or most banal—details of their daily lives for hundreds of Twitter "followers" or Facebook "friends" playing the role of fans.

Yet (and again this is hardly a new idea) even as social media satisfies our egotistic desires for fame, it also makes us painfully aware of the "Kicks, Cuffs, and Bastinados" to which the famous have always been vulnerable.[16] This awareness is manifest, for instance, in new policies regarding cyberbullying, in debates over Facebook's ever-evolving privacy settings, and in the worldwide outcry following revelations that the National Security Administration of the United States was tracking citizens' email and phone records.[17] In their struggles to evade such unwanted attentions without forgoing the social connectedness that these media foster, today's citizen-celebrities wrestle with different technologies but with similar assumptions about identity and self-presentation to those that emerged centuries ago. And many of them have developed similar strategies of self-presentation.

In 2010, for instance, artist Adam Harvey launched a series he calls "CV Dazzle" and that consists of a collection of hairstyles, makeup designs, and apparel meant to make the wearer illegible to the facial recognition software often employed in today's security cameras. According to his website, Harvey borrows the name of his series from "a type of World War I naval camouflage called Dazzle, which used cubist-inspired designs to break apart the visual continuity of a battleship and conceal its orientation and size. Likewise, CV Dazzle uses avant-garde hairstyling and make-up designs to break apart the continuity of a face."[18] The name "Dazzle" also suggests the particularly overexpressive qualities of a light so bright as to blind its viewer—or of designs

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15. *CV Dazzle* by David Harvey (2010). Used with permission.

that work not by covering a model's face but by making that face appear so freakish as to be illegible to the cameras designed to recognize it (figure 15).

Of course, Harvey's designs are hardly commonplace, and we'd be hard-pressed today to find a CV Dazzle hairstyle in any but the most fashion-forward (or surveillance-averse) crowds. This is not to say that overexpression has yet to spread, as celebrity has, to the masses. We might glimpse it, for instance, in the proliferation of "ironic" facial hair, large glasses, and deliberately clashing patterns among the "hipster" generation, whose penchant for the outdated and the oversized seems to invite the public gaze at the same time that the irony attributed to these fashions warns the gazer from reading them as direct signifiers for the wearer's identity. ("The whole point of hipsters is that they avoid labels and being labeled," writes Julia Plevin in the *Huffington Post*. "However, they all dress the same and act the same and conform in their non-conformity. Doesn't the fact that there is a hipster look go against all hipster beliefs?")[19] Christian Lorentzen, channeling *Thriller*, likens hipsters to "zombies" who resurrect the fashionable bodies of previous subcultures while rejecting their ideological souls.[20] Yet we might also regard them as today's overexpressive performers, their conflicted relationship with mass production and social media exemplified by their simultaneous embrace of LPs and iPods, of digital photos filtered to

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look like Polaroids; their illegibility as subjects evident in their waxed moustaches and oversized hats.

Once upon a time the celebrity was a freak, but in the three hundred years that have intervened between Lord Foppington's unwieldy wig and Jackson's controversial crotch grab, celebrity culture has shifted with the societies that practice it, with the fashions that allow it, and with the technologies that disseminate it. Constant throughout these shifts is the individual yearning for an identity that might be seen and admired by all but somehow dissected and deciphered by very few. Overexpression offers one path toward such an identity, one strategy to balance the exhilaration of publicity and the freedom of privacy within a modern Western world that seems, paradoxically, to require both. In the "*Chiaro Oscuro* of my mind" that characterized his autobiography of 1740, Colley Cibber articulated a strategy not only for navigating the twists and turns of the burgeoning celebrity culture of eighteenth-century England but also for bearing the burdens and enjoying the rewards of possessing, publicizing, and privatizing a modern self.

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